

THE RED RIBBON

By R. F. FOSTER



FTER the sheriff had delivered his prisoner, the usual formalities were over. The warden knew Coleman was coming in, and had already sent word to the shoe shop that one of their old hands had returned, after a year's absence, and the contractors had said they would take him on. It did not take long for the news to spread through the shop that Coleman was back again.

When the arrival of a prisoner attracts more than usual attention, it is due to one of two things: he has done something out of the common, or he has been something out of the common when he was in prison before. Coleman belonged to the latter class. He was a man of more than ordinary intelligence and ability, but his talents seem to have been early misdirected. He was one of those unfortunate for whom nature has done enough; education and training, nothing. He was tall and good-looking and had attracted the attention of a number of people who had told him, in a sermonizing sort of way, that he could have risen to distinction in almost any honest calling he might select; but, as he often remarked, none of them had offered him a job to start with. He had always expressed himself as willing to lead an honest life, but his want of education handicapped him, and he had never been able to find a footing in a business which he could follow with a feeling that it would eventually lead to something worth his while. It was only lately that he had hit upon a more promising pursuit than those that lead to prison.

The first hint of it was given him by a girl. He had met her at a public picnic in the early summer, when he had money and wore good clothes. They had a sort of quiet flirtation for an hour or so, and he had about made up his mind to speak to her when she was joined by a man named Corbett, whose father was a police captain, and who knew too much of Coleman's history to make him a desirable means of introduction. Instead of putting himself in her way and trying to attract her attention, Coleman now went to the other extreme and did his best to avoid her. As Corbett had not seen him yet, he thought it might be best to leave the place altogether and hope to meet her again some time, under other circumstances. What he wanted to meet her at all for, he did not exactly know, but there was something about her that held him, some sort of subtle magnetism that made him stay.

She was not what you would call a beauty, but she was one of those who seem to have just missed it. The swing of the head was Irish, but the eyes were brown. The chin was broad and round, and the mouth was firm and full. The hair was not as black as it seemed to be. It looked black because it was tied round with a narrow little red ribbon, but it had in it that peculiar brownish, reddish streak visible only in the sunlight, which marks the woman of the warm, confiding nature that can keep a secret.

Coleman could not get her out of his thoughts, no matter how much he kept out of her way. He was strolling aimlessly along one of the walks with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the ground when he suddenly found himself face to face with the girl and her companion. There was no avoiding the introduction which the man seemed rather unwilling to give and the girl seemed rather to insist upon. Ten minutes later Katie McCormack had taken possession of Coleman and she kept him for the rest of the afternoon.

During the following weeks things went along as such things usually go. For the first time in his life Coleman was sincerely sorry that he could not speak freely about his past and had to keep quiet about his future. Corbett soon saw that Katie had lost any interest that she might have had in him and that she talked about nothing but Coleman, so he thought it was about time for him to say something before things went too far. He began by hinting, but Katie cut him very short and insisted that he should say right out what he had to say about Coleman or keep his mouth shut. This brought out the whole truth like a flash, but Katie McCormack had gone too far to let Coleman go without a struggle now. The next time he called to see her, she shut the door behind her and stood with her back to it. She had made up her mind to say something savage, but her words would not come.

"I want you to tell me the truth, Tom." "What have I lied about?" "Silence is sometimes worse than lies, but we won't wrangle about that now. Tell me the truth, Tom. You know me well enough by this time to trust me, don't you?"

"I suppose Corbett has told you all he knows. What do you want me to say? That he's a liar?" "She did not answer and he did not look at her. He reached for his hat as if to go."

"You have been very good to me right along, Katie, and you will have to keep it up long enough to forgive me for having deceived you. I couldn't help it, little girl," he went on, looking at her for the first time. "All the girls I have known have been a tough lot. I have read about your kind in books, but they don't grow 'n bushes. You will have to forgive me, Katie; the temptation was too strong for me; that's all I can say. Yes, it's all true. I'm a jailbird, and I don't belong among the likes of you. Open the door and let me go." He took his hat from the table; but she did not move.

"Come here to me, Tom." The girl took his hat from him and set it on the table again. Then she put both her hands on his shoulders and looked him full in the face.

Don't be afraid to tell me the truth, Tom."

"I'm living on my share of the last job," he said defiantly. "That will make her take her hands down," he thought, but her hands did not come down. She only shook her head sadly.

"And then?" "Then what?"

"When that's spent?" "That's right little girl. You've hit it. Fact is, I don't believe I could do it again; not since I've known you."

"Haven't you got any friends?" "Thought I had one before I came in here to-night, but that was the limit, unless you count the likes of Corbett."

"Corbett says you are a confidence man. That's not a thief, is it?" Coleman smiled faintly. "Seems to me you are smart enough to make an honest living. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tom."

"In what line can I make a living?" "It don't matter what line, what matters is, are you willing to try it?"

"On one condition." He took hold of her wrists as if to take her hands from his shoulders.

"Well?" "That you won't go back on me, Katie."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before he realized how much he was asking.

She did not answer at first. She seemed to be thinking.

"We'll see about that later on. Promise me you will try."

"Promise me you will stick." The hands were taken gently from the shoulders now. Women sometimes do things which other people think are foolish. She promised she would "stick," and he promised he would try.

It was only when he was on his way homeward, full of hope and confidence, that he remembered his partner in the "job" on the proceeds of which he was now living, and he also recalled that he had done no "time" for that particular job, but might be called upon to do so at any moment. If he was going to make an honest living, the quicker he got it the better, and the further he got from his present surroundings the better also. But that meant leaving Katie behind him; which was not so easy now.

He thought the best thing to do was to tell her all about it; and her advice was to get away immediately, and if he got along well and felt sure of himself, she could follow him some day. He followed her advice and went. He found it was not so difficult, after all, to start in business in a small way, when you have the will to work and the patience to plod along for the present in the hope of the future. He had changed his name and shaved off his mustache, and, so far as he knew, he was safe from all his old associates and secure from police suspicion. If the police would only leave him alone, he would be a prosperous business man in a year or two.

But the ways of the police are not our ways. A man who was acquainted with the details of Coleman's last exploit got into the meshes of a detective's net, and, in order to escape arrest for some trifling affair of his own, he put the officer on the track of the larger game and gave him the names of Coleman and his partner. The partner was not to be found, but Corbett supplied the information necessary to locate Coleman by telling his father, the police captain, to watch Katie McCormack's mail. What did the police care about Coleman's reformation? They said that business was only a front stall and that he was better in prison.

The Jovers had quite a number of meetings before the trial. It is against the rules for a remanded prisoner to have any conversation with a visitor except in the hearing of a warden, but a good-looking girl, who knew how to use her eyes, can usually induce a warden not to use his ears. Coleman made the best of these opportunities. He knew he would be convicted and he also knew the prison to which he would be sent. He thought he knew a way out of it which did not lead through the gate, and he carefully plotted out his plan to her.

The time had now come to see if that plan would work. He was safely landed in the prison, but she had promised to attack, and they were agreed that if he once got clear away it should be with her, and then there would be no letters to betray his whereabouts. It takes time, money and friends to get out of prison. Coleman thought the situation over as he lay in his cell that night. He was willing to bide his time, and he had a friend on the outside worth a dozen ordinary friends, even if it was only a woman. The hitch was the money. All he had was sunk in the little business or had been spent in fruitless efforts to defend himself at the trial. If a prisoner does not go out through the gate in a freedom suit, he must have clothes to take the place of his stripes, fast horses to outfoot his pursuers, and tickets to take him beyond the seas. Two hundred dollars would be none too little if she was to go with him, and if she could not go with him he did not care to go.

Two hundred dollars was simply impossible to him, and as for Katie, she had shaken her head at the mere suggestion of it, but at the same time she would not say that it was impossible. It might take a year, perhaps two; she might never be able to manage it; he would have to trust her and time. While she was talking to him about it, hopefully and cheerfully, many things seemed possible. Lying on his back in a cell, with the sound of the safety bell still ringing in his ears, nothing seemed possible, except to be patient and to put in the whole ten years.

Once a month he got a letter from her. There was nothing in these epistles to attract the warden's suspicion, and Coleman paid no attention to anything but the stamp on the envelope. This was always slowly soaked off in his cell, and, after the few closely penciled words under the gum had been deciphered, the

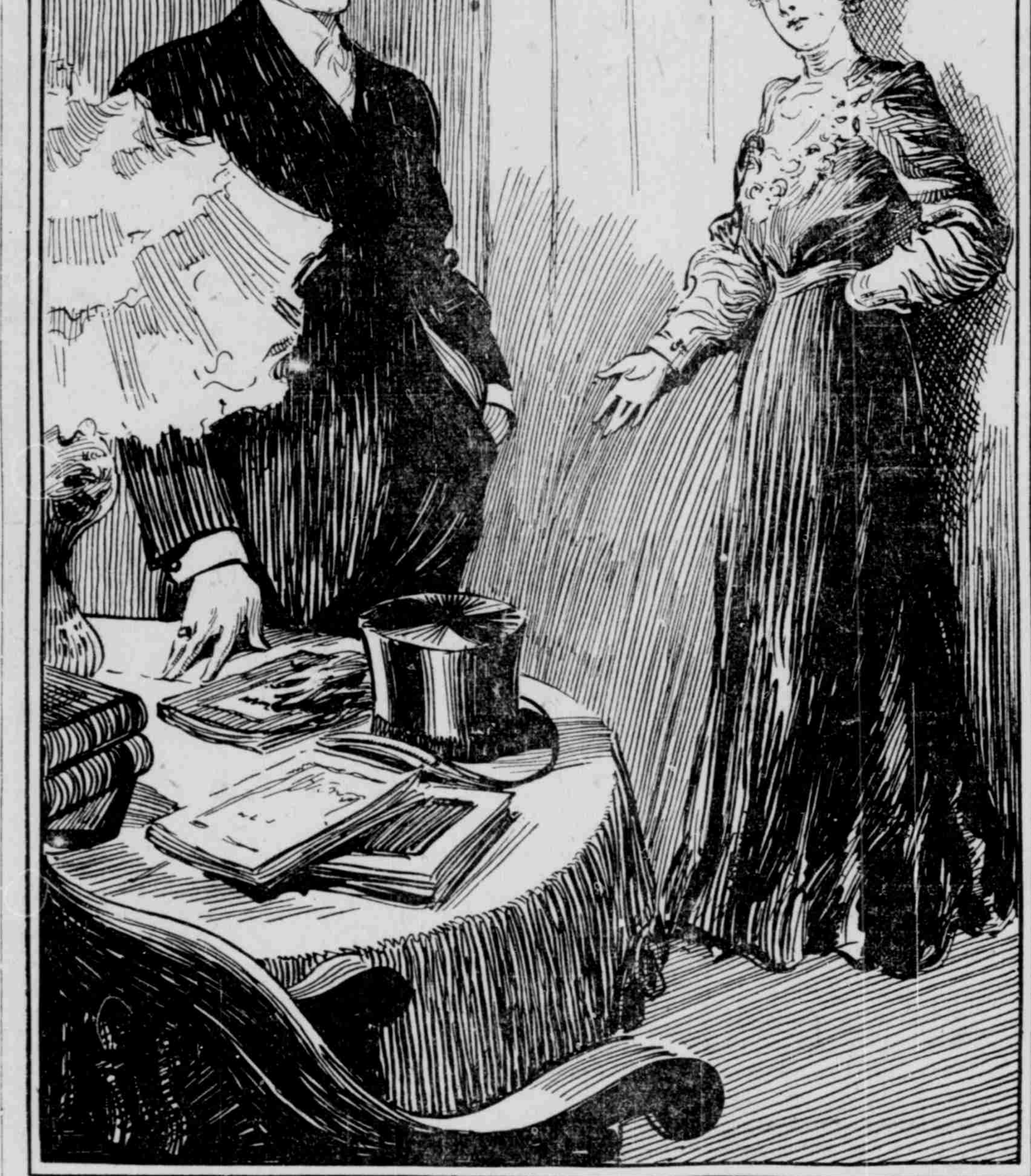
little piece of paper was carefully swallowed.

Coleman's plan of escape was a very simple one. He knew that he would be taken back to his old place in the shoe shop, and he knew that in the yard just outside was a large iron grating covering the opening of the sewer which drained the yard when it was washed. The sewer connected with a little river running through the town about a hundred yards beyond the prison walls. Whether or not this sewer was large enough to crawl through, Coleman did not know, but he did know that the grating was loose, because he had often seen it lifted while serving his previous sentence. The line of prisoners marched close to this grating in going to and from the dining room, and Coleman had often looked at it and wondered how big the sewer under it was. If a man could crawl through it and find a suit of clothes at the other end and a hack waiting for him on the roadway above, the rest was easy.

The first thing Katie had undertaken porter came through the shop on his usual morning rounds, and the officer of the shop called Coleman to the desk. He knew what was coming; the letter had fallen into the wrong hands, and he was to be called down to the office at 2 o'clock that afternoon and have his privileges taken away from him for a month. He did not care. He walked up to the desk, all the old bluff of the confidence man in his face.

"Visitor to see you out front," was all the officer said. He knew who it was. She had never come to see him before. Now she had come to say good-by.

She did not seem particularly pleased to see him, and he might have been simply an acquaintance. Just before he entered the guard-room he thought he heard her engaged in rather a lively chat with the deputy warden who was to be present at their interview. During the ten minutes which she was allowed to stay, she certainly seemed to have as much to say to the officer as to the lover. She seemed in very good spirits, and



"I Want You to Tell Me the Truth, Tom."

to do was to get some definite information about the sewer, and the first crushing disappointment of Coleman's prison life was to gather from the message under the gum that Katie could not manage it. She dare not ask any one to get the information for her. What should she do?

Writing notes the size of a postage stamp once a month is slow work, and Coleman began to lose heart. The impracticability of the whole scheme became more and more apparent to him. When he thought it all over in the quiet seclusion of his cell. The whole thing was nothing but a lover's dream. It had looked rosy enough while he was talking it over with her, but the windows of a prison put things in a very different light.

He wrote her a long letter and told her just how he felt about it; told her he had already asked too much, that she had done too much, and that it would be better if she gave him up and forgot that they had ever met. To write a letter in prison is comparatively easy, even if it has to be on the back of a bill of lading or an order blank. To get it into the post is not as difficult as it seems, if you have a little of the prison currency—tobacco—and know to whom to give it. Coleman carried the letter in his pocket, hoping for a chance to slip it to one of the drivers that hauled goods from the shoe shop to the railroad. He had been told by other prisoners that this particular driver did such things occasionally, and, happening to meet him on the landing, he slipped the note and the tobacco into his hand.

"Buy a stamp and post that for me, pard. It's for my girl."

"Cert," was all the man said.

Two or three days later the colored

complimented Coleman on his good appearance, but thought he looked a little pale. Pulling the little red ribbon from her hair, she put it suddenly around his neck, and she asked the deputy if he did not think that was an improvement. The officer said he thought it was too small a necktie for a man.

"If it's here to-morrow, it's big enough for a man," she said, quick as a flash, looking Coleman straight in the eye. Then she tied it into her hair again, shook hands rather indifferently, and another little chat with the officer, who seemed still to be thinking over what she had just said, and was gone.

Not a word about his note; not even a hint. Her whole manner seemed so changed! At least toward him. He had not seen her for months—could it be possible that she had ceased to care for him? He could not understand it, but why should he worry about it, anyway? He had already given her up; she had his letter; what was the use of thinking any more about her?

Next morning, when the line marched from breakfast to the shoe shop, Coleman looked hollow-eyed and tired. He took his place mechanically and looked stepped, along with the rest, down the steps, across the court, into the yard and past the grating.

At the grating he stopped as if he had been shot. The man behind him cursed and the weight of the line pushed him on, but before he had had time to be sure he was not mistaken. A narrow little red ribbon was hanging across the bars of the grating over the sewer.

"If it's here to-morrow, it's big enough for a man." There was no misunderstanding what had happened. She had crawled through that sewer during the

night and had left that message for him, so that he should take heart again. "It was big enough for a man," she had done that for him. Then she loved him still.

At noon the message had been washed away and with it had disappeared all traces of his mistrust.

It was Katie's turn to worry now. It seemed to her as if the door stood open for her lover, and all that was wanted was the money. They say everything comes to him who waits, and she found her chance at last; an offer to go into a little wax-flower making business, that promised well. She would be only a learner at first, but after the first year she could make something, and, after figuring it all over, she thought that, with the greatest care and economy, she might have the coveted \$200 in about two years. Perhaps it would be better not to wait until she had enough for both, but to set him free as soon as possible and take chance of following him later on. A hundred dollars would be enough for him alone, and she could save that in a year.

eries which she liked so well, but had resolutely resolved to do without for the next two years, when she noticed a man watching her rather attentively. She could not see his face very well in the semi-darkness, but he seemed to be following her as if he thought he knew her. She stopped in front of a shop window to let him pass on, but he waited for her, and then came up and spoke to her. It was only a remark about something in the window, just an excuse to begin a conversation. He was a fine looking man, with a peculiarly melodious voice, which she felt certain she had heard before somewhere.

"Where have I met you?" he asked suddenly. "I don't know. I thought I'd seen you somewhere, but I guess I'm mistaken."

"May I ask your name?"

"She thought for a moment. Should she give her right name or not? Why not? She had nothing to conceal, and she was curious to know who he was."

"Katie McCormack."

It was evident that the name was a disappointment to him.

"I can't place you," she said, "perhaps because I can't see you very well, but your voice sounds like I've heard it before. Your name's not Johnson?"

"No!" It was his turn to think about giving his right name now. "No. My name's Melin. Yours is a face that a man does not forget in a hurry, but I don't know where I have seen it before."

"Funny name. Never heard it before. I guess I don't know you, so I'll say goodnight."

"Why in such a hurry?" he said quickly. "I have nothing particular to do with myself this evening. Perhaps if we go and have a little supper together we might talk things over and find out where we have met before."

"No. She would not listen to it; but she did not object very strongly when he still walked on with her. If she did not want anything to eat, perhaps he could buy her a little present of some sort. No, she did not want any presents."

"Perfectly contented. Don't want anything in the world, eh?"

"Yes," she said slowly; "there is one thing I want very much."

"And what is that, pray?"

"Two hundred dollars."

The man laughed out loud. "Sure you could not get along with a hundred and fifty?" he said in a joking sort of way.

"No. Two hundred or nothing."

"Well, you are an interesting specimen at least," he said, looking at her rather quizzically. "Now, I suppose I may ask how it comes you want two hundred dollars and don't want anything else on earth?"

"It was darker on the street now, and they were going across a long bridge over the railroad. She tried again to get a good look at his face, but while she might have seen it before, she could not say where. The voice she was sure she knew, but she could not tell to whom it had belonged. She stopped and looked down at the trains. She was thinking if it was worth while to invent a story that would account for her wanting two hundred dollars. He looked like a man of means and influence, and perhaps, if the story was plausible enough, he might buy her in the way of earning that amount. He was leaning on the rail beside her; no one else was on the bridge.

"If I tell you, do you think you could help me earn the money?"

"Help you earn it? Well, what are you; typewriter and shorthand, dress-maker, or what?"

"No. I'm learning to make wax flowers."

"Well, this is interesting. I suppose you want to buy wax while the price is down." He was laughing again now, but the girl was not. She had started to tell him the truth and his reception of it chilled her. She looked him straight in the eye with one of those peculiar searching looks that will make any man stop laughing and think.

"Pardon me," he said quite suddenly; "I was only joking."

"You didn't answer my question. Do you think you could put me in the way of earning enough to save two hundred in a year?"

"In a year?" The man looked at her in astonishment; then he looked at the grating and then he looked at her again. He seemed to be turning over something in his mind.

"Look here! I'll take a chance on you. If you will tell me what you want it for, and it's a good reason, I'll give you my open palm on the railing, 'bless me, I'll give you two hundred, even if I am a fool for doing it.'"

"You are a fool," she said very quietly, "and there is something about you that rings true, for all your chaff, although I don't quite believe your name's Melin."

She began by making up a story about wanting the money for a very dear friend who was in deep trouble. It was not a good story, and, after he had listened to it attentively for a minute, he began to question her with a peculiar skill that soon involved her in contradictions which she tried in vain to straighten out. Finally he interrupted her.

"I don't think story-telling is one of your accomplishments. I should not like to think that you were deliberately trying to deceive me, but you are evidently not telling me the whole truth. If you cannot trust me, say so candidly. I have taken a fancy for you somehow, and I am rather pleased to find you are not deceitful by nature. You are evidently in trouble of some kind, and you say you want two hundred dollars. I have promised to give it to you if you will tell me why you want it. If the reason is such that you cannot disclose it, say so frankly. If you cannot trust me, why should I trust you?"

"I dare not tell," she said slowly. "I should be afraid to trust a friend, and a stranger."

"Unless I am much mistaken, you are not the kind of woman to be easily deceived by a man. I leave it to you to decide whether you can trust me or not."

Should she trust him? Providence seemed to have thrown him in her way and she might never have such another chance. Her common sense kept saying "Yes," and, as usual with women, her inclinations carried the day. The true story once begun, it ran on easily enough. He no longer questioned or interrupted, but let her on with a sort of silent sympathy which made it easy for her to tell him everything even to the methods of communication and the arrangements for the final signal.

When she came to the trap through the sewer, he took off his hat and wiped his face. "Holy smoke! Do you really think the man was worth that?" He asked if that was the same kind of ribbon in her hair now, and she told him it was; she always wore the same, and it was to be the signal for Tom Coleman to leave the prison. She thought he started just a

little when she mentioned the name, but it must have been only imagination, just as she thought, his face looked a little more familiar when he took his hat off. He did not say anything for a minute or two after she had finished, but stood there looking down at the trains, staring and untwisting the little red ribbon in his fingers. Then he came over and put his hand in hers, gently and tenderly, like the touch of an old friend.

"Don't you do it, my dear girl. It's a very incenseful scheme, but I don't work. You would do your part all right, I know, and he may have the nerve to try his, but I don't think he could get away so easily. In the first place, he might be seen from the wall and shot at, and in these days of telephones your hack would not go two blocks before it would be stopped, even if your man reached it in safety. If he was caught and taken back, he would lose all his good conduct time, have his lights taken from him, and then, after a month or two, he would be sent to the penitentiary and probably get two or three good floggings into the bargain."

"You seem to know a good deal about prison matters."

"Yes, well, fact is, I've been here several times on visitors' days. But you take my advice, my dear girl, and don't risk it, or you will only make matters worse. Even if he got away, you both would be fugitives from justice for the rest of your lives, and you would not have a moment's peace. Anyone who recognized you would either blackmail you or denounce you to the police, and you would live in a perpetual nightmare of suspicion and distrust. Ten years is a long time to wait, but there is a year or more off for good conduct, and he might get a pardon before that if he behaves well. In fact I don't see why you shouldn't do something in this line now, if your story is true about his business. If your man really made a start, I think that should count for something. With a girl like you at his elbow to push him along, he must do great things."

"Do you think it would be of any use for me to see the Governor?"

"Without some political pull to help you, no. He would not believe your story about reform. They all say that. You are a fine girl to stick to a man like that, but you take my advice and drop that escape business, or you will get into trouble yourself and do your man no good. Well, pulling out his watch, 'I must be off now, but I'll say goodnight.'"

"But you won't say anything, will you?" and if we should try it, you won't give us away?" She seemed half sorry that she had been so confiding and held him back, but she said nothing more.

"You said you could trust me; trust my judgment as well and don't risk it. When people really try to do right they must be consistent. You are planning a felony, intending to be a felon, and you are not caught. Stick to what is right, like a good girl, and you will come out all right in the end. The day will come when you will see that I am right. Good night!" He took off his hat and stuffed the little piece of ribbon absent-mindedly into his pocket, and walked away.

Two days after that, some men came and put a new grating in the prison yard. It was loaded softly into the stone. Coleman saw it as he passed to dinner and knew that that was the end of his long-cherished dream, and that the only hope now was to go over the wall. The same afternoon he noticed that there was no stamp on the envelope that a fellow prisoner received, and the gummed part of the flap had also been cut away. There was something uneasy about the envelope. Next day he slipped another note into the driver's hands, telling Katie that by some means they had been discovered or betrayed and that she must not write any more notes under stamps.

When Katie got that letter she cried. She did not sit down and cry. Of course it was all her fault, just as it had been in the first place before the trial. She realized instantly that the man on the bridge had betrayed her, and she was furious with herself to think she had been such a fool as to trust him just because he had a winning voice and was good looking. And he had taken the ribbon, too! What a mercy that he had not used it as a trap and put it on the grating so as to catch Tom in the act. Who on earth could that man be? She thought of all the people she had had anything to do with for the past year. She thought of her first meeting with Tom, of Corbett, of Tom's arrest, and the trial.

The trial! Why did she not think of that before? Now she knew that she had heard that voice. The recollection seemed to overwhelm her and take her breath like a wave of the sea. Her chance acquaintance was the prosecuting attorney, the man who had secured her lover's conviction.

At first she could do nothing but walk up and down the floor, wringing her hands and crying. "Fool! Fool! Fool!" Then she thought of putting on her things and going to Melin's house. She went around to the drug store to look up his address in the directory. There was no such name. The clerk told her the prosecuting attorney's name was Golder, not Melin. So he had taken a false name and played her false friends. She would not go near him. He was too contemptible for her to speak to him even. It was maddening to think of the perfidy of men and the silly folly of confiding women.

A few days afterward Coleman was ordered to the warden's private office, out front. He had been expecting something of the kind every day for a week, but he had determined to show his face on the matter and tell the whole truth. He was asked about it. The chief warden received him with a very cheery good morning.

"Got news for you, Coleman," he said. "Can you guess?"

Coleman turned his convict's cap round and round nervously in his fingers. The warden's manner was reassuring, but his own conscience made him tremble. He did not know what to say.

"You have been very kind, sir," he started out with.

"Oh, I had nothing to do with it. I believe it was the prosecuting attorney who fixed it up. You made some inquiries about that little business you had up the country, and found you were respected by the people you dealt with, and they sort of liked you and were sorry you got into trouble. Then I suppose he talked it over with the Governor, and the Governor said that if you were willing to come here, you could get what money is coming to you for overtime as soon as the clock comes in. The porter has gone for a freedom suit for you, and I have ordered a hack; that's my treat. Your girl will be here in a minute. Here she comes now."

The next minute Katie was coming quietly on her lover's shoulder, while the warden pretended to be looking out of the window. She could not say anything, but she handed Tom a little note which contained \$200 tied together with a little red ribbon. It was written on the prosecuting attorney's office paper. All it said was that the Governor had agreed upon for Tom to leave the prison. With best wishes from your sincere friend, Melin."

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